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ABSTRACT

As part of a one-year trial project, in fall 1981, Oakton College students who scored below 35 on the Educational Testing Service Test of Written Expression were not permitted to enroll in C101 (an introductory communications course) until they had successfully completed a developmental communications course or had retaken and passed the exam. To assess this mandatory placement policy, all sections of fall 1980 and fall 1981 C101 courses were compared with respect to grade distribution and course completion rates. Individual student scores on the Test of Written Expression (TWE) and the Nelson-Denny Reading Tests (NDRT) were correlated with measures of academic performance, such as grades in communications courses and grade point average (GPA). The study revealed that: (1) under mandatory placement, a higher percentage of enrollees in C101 successfully completed the course than under advisory placement procedures used the year before; (2) TWE scores were not significantly correlated to student course grades or overall GPA, while NDRT scores were strongly correlated to course grades; (3) NDRT total scores (which combined vocabulary and reading comprehension scores) were strongly related to students' GPA's for courses other than communications courses; and (4) grades in C101 were not related to grades in other courses. Based on the findings, recommendations to use the NDRT for placement and to track subsequent performance in developmental courses were made. (KL)

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Oakton Community College

Assessment of Mandatory Placement in Communications

Fall - 1981

BY

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JC 820 147

Office of Institutional Research
March, 1982

Executive Summary

Assessment of Mandatory Placement in Communications
Fall 1981

Introduction: In fall 1981 students scoring below 35 on an ETS writing test were prohibited from enrolling in communications 101. As part of a one-year trial for this mandatory placement policy it was agreed an assessment of mandatory placement would be made.

Methodology: Two units of analysis were used.

1. All sections of communications 101 in fall 1980 and in fall 1981 were compared relative to grade distributions and percentage of students obtaining credit in the course.

2. Individual students' scores on placement tests were associated with a variety of variables measuring academic performance and retention (e.g., grades in communications courses, grade-point averages, percentage of courses completed).

Findings: In the fall of 1980 32% of students were advised not to enroll in communications 101.

In the fall of 1981 40% of students who took placement tests were not permitted to enroll in communications 101.

Students who enrolled in communications 101 in the fall of 1980 who had been advised not to, and who stayed in the course beyond midterm, did as well as students advised into communications 101 in the first place.

A significantly higher percentage of students intitially enrolled in communications 101 under mandatory placement completed the course for credit compared to those enrolling under voluntary placement (80% and 59%, respectively)

53% of the students enrolling in developmental communications in the fall of 1981 successfully completed the course.

There was no difference in mean ETS scores among students who in the fall of 1981
--did not enroll at Oakton at all
--did not enroll in communications courses
--enrolled in communications courses

Students who scored 35 or above on the ETS in fall 1981 were more likely to complete all of their courses, and less likely to complete only one-quarter of them, than students scoring 34 or below.

The ETS score is not significantly related to students' grades in communications 101 or grade point average in other courses.

The Nelson-Denny Total score is strongly related to students' grade point averages for courses excluding communications.

The Nelson-Denny Reading Test is strongly related to students' grades in communications 101.

No significant relationship exists between a student's grade in communications 101 and grades in other courses.

Areas of ambiguity in implementing the mandatory placement policy exist. Student honor and faculty-initiated checks are factors insuring compliance with the policy.

Conclusions:

Mandatory placement appears to insure that students meet minimum competency for enrolling in communications 101.

Faculty perceive that communications 101 classes are more homogeneous in skills under mandatory placement than under voluntary placement.

Higher success rates (completion of communication 101) are attained under mandatory placement than under voluntary placement.

Recommendations:

Students enrolled in communications 051 in the fall of 1981 should be tracked to assess their performances in communications 101 and in other courses.

Faculty may wish to consider eliminating the ETS as a placement test and using the Nelson-Denny or another reading test instead.

Faculty and the Admissions Office may wish to explore tightening the registration procedure to include a prerequisite check prior to confirming enrollment in communications 101.

Faculty may wish to review whether a student must earn a T in communications 051 prior to enrolling in 101.

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Assessment of Mandatory Placement in Communications

Fall - 1981

In the fall of 1981 Oakton College instituted a policy that a student scoring below a specified level on a communications (writing) placement examination would not be allowed to register in the college credit introductory communications course until s/he successfully completed developmental communications or retook the placement test and scored at or above the designated level. The policy was instituted on a one-year trial basis. As part of the agreement an assessment of the effects of mandatory placement was conducted. This report contains the assessment.

Units of Analysis and Data Base

Two units of analysis are used in this study. The first unit of analysis is the individual student. Data about individual students are drawn from several sources. Random samples of 278 students who took placement examinations for the fall of 1980 and 133 students who took placement tests for the fall of 1981 were selected.* Additionally some data for all students taking placement tests for the fall of 1981 are available.

* Data for all placement test-takers for 1980 are not readily available. During 1980-81 the 278 student sample was drawn so that descriptive data about the population of test-takers could be generated. The 1981 sample was drawn to allow for intensive analysis over several semesters rather than to generate descriptive data only. The differing purposes and the fact that the two samples are not directly compared make their differing sizes irrelevant. Put another way, the only data about fall 1980 placement test-takers are from the 1980 sample.

In 1980 a student scoring 22 or below on the Educational Testing Service's Test of Written Expression was advised to take communications 051. In 1981 faculty added items to the ETS test and raised the specified score to 34 or below. A student scoring 34 or below in 1981 was in theory prohibited from enrolling in communications 101, unless the student had passed communications 051.

As the second unit of analysis each communications class; that is, each section of communications 101, is considered. Comparisons of grade distributions and completion rates before and after the introduction of mandatory placement are made. Comparisons are made between fall 1980 communications classes (prior to mandatory placement) and fall 1981 communications classes (after mandatory placement).

Enrollment in Communications 101 - Fall 1981

Although the mandatory placement policy appears to clearly specify who could enroll in communications 101, analysis of the implementation of the policy reveals several ambiguous areas.

Data collected by the Learning Laboratory indicates that of students enrolled in communications 101 in the fall 1981 term, 31% had scored below the designated ETS cut-off point and 24% had not been tested at all. However, data were not collected to indicate how many of these students had completed 051 and therefore met the placement policy specifications.

Although the placement policy indicates a student must pass 051 or earn an appropriate score on the placement test, in reality no uniform check is used to insure that the former requirement has been met. Students frequently enroll for the next term during the current term and do not know what their current grades will be. Those students enrolled in 051 may in good faith register for 101, yet fail to earn a T in 051. Other students may simply enroll in 101 even though they know they will not earn a T in 051.

Communications faculty can ask 101 students if they have completed 051, and a few faculty check students' transcripts with the Admissions Office. For the most part, however, it appears that the implementation of the 051 requirement is left to the honor of the students and the choice of each instructor.

Figure 1 outlines the various paths by which a student can enroll in communications 101. As indicated, there are several possibilities, denoted by a question mark in the terminal box, for which clear and consistent applications of the policy do not exist.

As a verification of placement test results each student enrolled in communications 051 and 101 writes a brief essay the first week of class. Faculty use these writing samples to confirm the student's initial placement, to recommend transfers from 051 to 101, or to require transfers from 101 to 051. Only four students were recommended from 051 to 101, and only 10 were required to transfer to 051. Thus, although it is unclear how many

communications 101 students actually complied with the mandatory placement policy (had completed 051 or scored above 34 on the test) the very small number of required transfers back to 051 suggests that the vast majority of students enrolling in the course did meet minimum standards. In other words, the combination of requiring testing, 051, and/or a firstweek writing sample produced a communications 101 enrollment in compliance with the policy and faculty perceptions of minimal competence for entering 101.

Student Performance

Voluntary Placement - Fall 1980

In 1980 the mean score on the ETS exam was 25, and the median was 26. Thirty-two percent of test takers scored 22 or below and were advised to take communications 051 rather than communications 101. Barely one-half (53%) of those who enrolled in a communication course and scored 22 or below accepted the 051 recommendation. Twenty-three percent of all enrollees in communications 101 had been advised to take communications 051 instead. Seventeen percent of communications 101 a student who received grades of A, B, or C in the fall of 1980 would not have been permitted into the course if mandatory placement had been in effect, and slightly more communications 101 students who scored 22 or below on the test received Rs or Ns in

communications 101 than would have occurred by chance alone. In other words, once enrolled in communications 101 students advised not to take the course did nearly as well as those who scored above the cut-off point if the student stayed in class until midterm (see below).

Mandatory Placement - Fall 1981

In the fall of 1981 a total of 1375 individuals took communications placement exams. The mean and median scores were 36 (recall that additional items on the 1981 tests raised the total point score possible.) Forty percent of students scored 34 or below; i.e., were not permitted to register in communications 101.

A random sample of 133 individuals who took communications placement tests for the fall of 1981 was selected for intensive analysis. Of the sample, all but four took the ETS examination. Forty-seven percent of the sample were male, fifty three percent were female; the average age was 27, with 83% for whom data were available being age 24 or below.

Of the 133 individuals in the sample, 26 (20%) enrolled in no courses at Oakton in the fall term or dropped all their courses prior to midterm. Their mean ETS score was 35.1. Of the remaining 107 people, 24 (22%) enrolled in communications 051, 57 (53%) enrolled in communications 101, and 26 (24%) enrolled in neither course. The mean ETS score for those enrolled at Oakton

but not taking communications was 36.2; 62% of these people were eligible to take communications 101. Only 6 individuals enrolled in communications 001, Reading.

One hundred-twenty eight individuals in the sample took the Nelson-Denny Tests. Table 1 summarizes their scores. Mean scores are at high school levels, while the percent scoring at college levels ranges from 36 to 48.

Seven students completed communications 051 with the grade T. The other 17 either dropped the course or received an R. Comparable figures for all students enrolled in communications 051 indicate 53% received a T grade. The grade distribution for those taking communciations 101 is presented in Table 2. It is closely in line with grade distributions for all students in communications 101 classes.

Students in the sample enrolled in from one to seven courses in the fall term, with 28% enrolling in three or fewer and 60% enrolling in four or five. To assess the assocation between ETS scores and course completion ratios, the percentage of courses successfully completed by each student was calculated. These percentages were then compared between two groups; those obtaining an ETS score of 34 or below, and those scoring 35 or above. Results are presented in Table 3. Although differences are not statistically significant, a pattern is revealed. Students who score less than 35 are more likely to complete one-quarter or fewer of their courses, while those who score 35 or above are more likely to complete all of their courses. There was no significant association between ETS scores and the receipt of X or R grades.

To further investigate the association between the ETS score and academic performance several other calculations were made as well. Students grade point averages for fall 1981 courses excluding communications were calculated. The GPA mean was 2.57, with a standard deviation of .85. This means that 66% of students earned a GPA, excluding communications, between 1.72, or roughly C-/D+, and 3.42, or B+.

The correlation between the ETS score and this GPA was negligible: less than 2% of the variance in GPA was explained by ETS score (r=.11). The single variable which is most powerful in predicting GPA is a students total score on the Nelson Denny Test; 29% of the GPA variance is explained by the Nelson-Denny Total (r=.54)

The correlations between ETS score, Nelson-Denny scores, and grades received in communications 101 were also calculated. The ETS score explains none of the variance in grades received for those who earned credit in Communications 101. The Nelson-Denny reading test, on the other hand, explains 41% of the variance in grades in communications 101.

Finally, the correlation between the grade in communications 101 and GPA without communications was calculated. The correlation was .25, meaning that there is minimal relationship between the grade in communications 101 and in other courses.

Class Performance

As of the tenth day enrollment count, 1009 students were enrolled in 44 sections of communications 101 in the fall of 1980. Forty-six sections of communications 101 in fall 1981 contained 1007 students. The distribution of grades A, B, C, and D was roughly the same in the two terms. However, in fall 1980, before mandatory placement, 41% of students enrolled as of the tenth day failed to receive credit in Communications 101 at the end of the term. That is, only 59% of course enrollees earned grades of A, B, C, or D. Comparable figures for 1981, with mandatory placement, indicate only 20% of students failed to obtain passing grades at the end of the term. In other words, under mandatory placement a significantly higher percentage of enrollees in communications 101 successfully complete the course than under a system of advisory placement.

Conclusions

Based on evidence presented in the study and faculty responses to a survey in the fall of 1981, it appears that under mandatory placement a higher percentage of enrollees in communications 101 successfully complete the course than under voluntary placement, and faculty perceive their 101 classes to be more homogeneous in the past. The small number of transfers between communications 101 and 051 suggests that students enrolled in 101 meet minimum standards of competence necessary for entering that course.

Recommendations

Recommendations include the following:

Students enrolled in communications 051 in the fall of 1981 should be tracked to assess their performances in communications 101 and in other courses.

Faculty may wish to consider eliminating the ETS as a placement test and using the Nelson-Denny or another reading test instead.

Faculty and the Admissions Office may wish to explore tightening the registration procedure to include a prerequisite check prior to confirming enrollment in communications 101.

Faculty may wish to review whether a student must earn a T in communications 051 prior to enrolling in 101.

Table 1

Nelson-Denny Scores of 1981 Sample

	Mean Score[1]	Standard Deviation	Percent at College Level
Vocabulary	12.2	2.6	48.4
Comprehension	11.2	2.9	39.8
Total	11.7	2.6	43.1
Reading	10.6	3.5	35.5

[1]N=128

Table 2

Grade Distribution of Students Who Took Placement Tests - Communications 101 - Fall 1981[1]

Grade	N	%
A	15	25.4
B	23	39.0
C	10	16.9
D	1	1.7
X	1	1.7
R	3	5.1
Withdraw	6	10.2

[1] Data are drawn from 1981 sample; percentages are generalizable to population of students who took placement tests and enrolled in communications 101.

Table 3

ETS Score and Percent of Courses Completed -

Students Who Took Placement Tests - Fall 1981

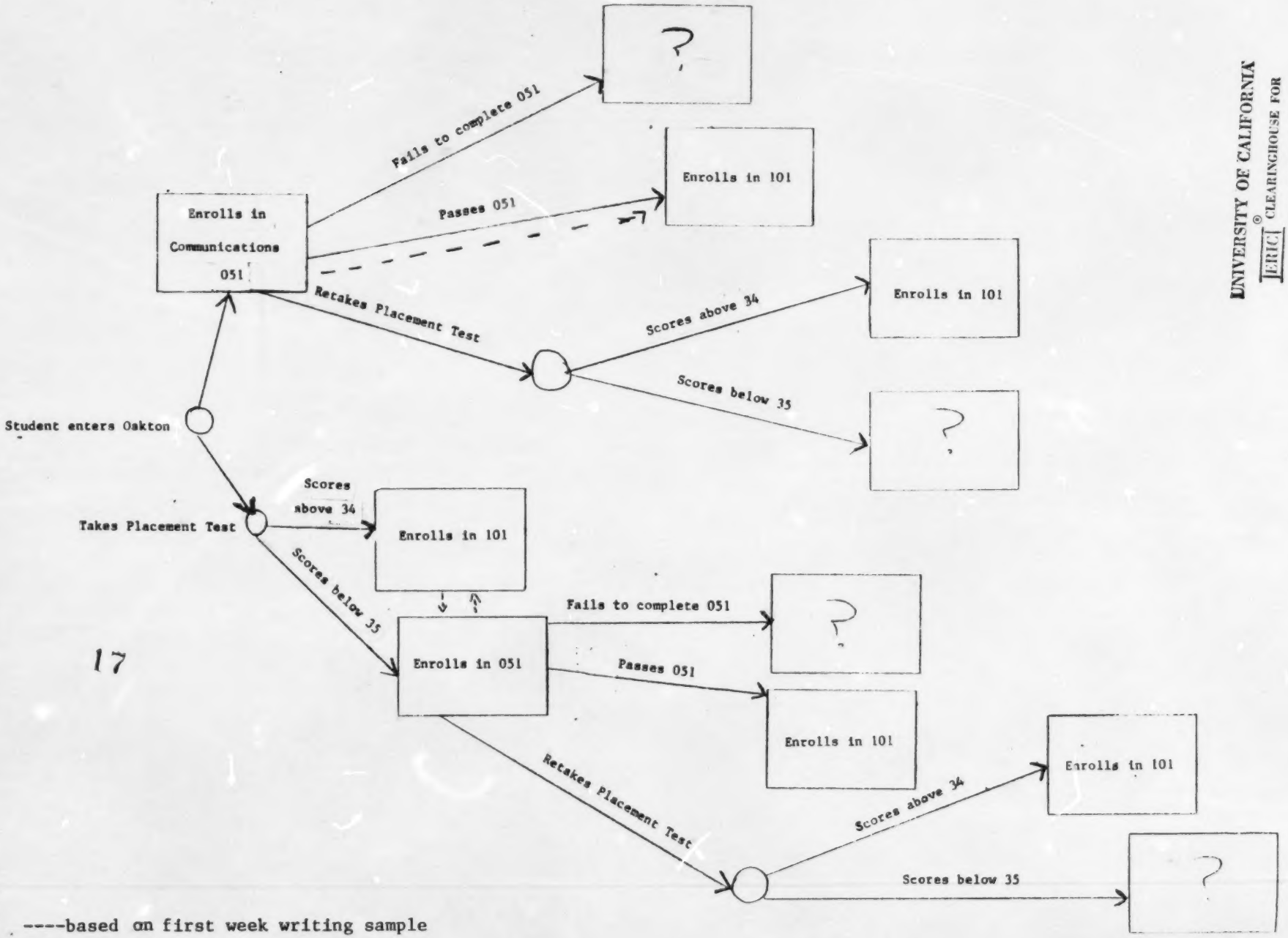
Percent Courses Completed	0-25	33-50	60-80	100
ETS				
1-34	19 (36)	10 (19)	10 (19)	14 (26)
35+	19 (25)	12 (16)	14 (19)	30 (40)

$X^2 = 2.95$; df = 3; $p > .05$

Numbers in parentheses are percentages of those in each ETS category who completed this percent of courses. Percentages are generalizable to population of students who took placement tests.

Figure 1

Path of Student Enrollment in Communications 101



----based on first week writing sample

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